VDH VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
Protecting You and Your Environment

News Release

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VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH WARNS OF RISKS TO WATER SUPPLY DUE TO STORM

(RICHMOND, Va.)—The Virginia Department of Health (VDH) reminds residents that Tropical Storm Ernesto may have contaminated water supplies, especially in areas of a tidal surge or flooding. Drinking contaminated water may cause illness. Individuals cannot assume that the water in storm-affected areas is safe to drink. If you experience low or no water pressure or see evidence of cloudy water, it is best to boil your water as a precaution against contamination.

In areas affected by the storm, water treatment plants may not be operating. Even if they are, storm damage and flooding can contaminate water lines. Listen for public announcements about the safety of the municipal water supply.

If your well has been flooded, it needs to be tested and disinfected after the storm passes and the floodwaters recede. Questions about testing should be directed to your local or state health department.

WATER FOR DRINKING AND COOKING

Safe drinking water includes bottled, boiled or treated water. The following are guidelines to ensure your post-storm water supply is safe for use.

- Do not use contaminated water to wash dishes, brush your teeth, wash and prepare food or make ice.
- Drink only bottled, boiled or treated water until your supply is tested and deemed safe.
- Boiling water kills harmful bacteria and parasites. Bringing water to a rolling boil for one minute will kill infectious organisms (germs).
- Water may be treated with chlorine by mixing eight drops (1/8 teaspoon; about the size of a dime) of ordinary household bleach (free of fragrances and additives) per gallon of water. Mix the solution thoroughly, and let stand for about 30 minutes. However, this treatment will not kill parasitic organisms that may have entered a flooded well. Iodine tablets available at sporting goods stores may also be used.

Containers for water should be rinsed with a bleach solution before reusing them (one tablespoon bleach per gallon of water). Use water storage tanks and other types of containers with caution. For example, fire truck storage tanks as well as previously used cans or bottles may be contaminated with microbes or chemicals. Do not rely on untested devices for decontaminating water.

(more)

HOW DO I DISINFECT MY WELL?

It is important to disinfect both well and plumbing water with ordinary household bleach to ensure that all infectious agents are destroyed.

If you have water treatment devices, remove all membranes, cartridges and filters and replace them after the chlorination process is completed. The amount of chlorine determines the length of time you allow the bleach to remain in your system.

VDH recommends the following steps to disinfect a contaminated well:

- If the water is discolored before adding the bleach, run the water until it is clear for up to 10 minutes.
- Turn off and then drain your hot water heater— bleach is not effective in water above 105 degrees.
- Remove and replace charcoal filters after the disinfecting process is completed.
- To avoid adding contamination to the well during disinfection, clean the work area around the top of the well. Then, remove grease and mineral deposits from accessible parts of the well head and flush the outside surfaces with one-half cup of bleach in five gallons of water.
- Turn off the pump. Remove the cap or the well plug on the rubber seal. There are many types of well caps and plugs. If you have questions, you should contact a licensed well driller. If you have a submersible pump, you may also want to contact a licensed well driller for advice on disinfection procedures.
- The recommended amount of bleach varies depending on the amount of water in the well. However, a half gallon of ordinary unscented household bleach should be adequate for most home wells. Try to coat the sides of the casing as you pour. If you get bleach on the pump or wiring, flush it thoroughly with fresh water to prevent later corrosion.
- Re-cap or plug the well opening and wait 30 minutes.
- Turn on and, if needed, re-prime the pump. Open all of the faucets on the system one at a time. Allow the water to run until there is a noticeable smell of bleach. You may also want to flush the toilets. If you have outside faucets, you may want to direct the water away from sensitive plants. If you cannot detect a bleach odor, repeat the disinfecting process.
- Turn off all of the faucets and allow the bleach to remain in the system for at least four hours, although overnight is preferable.
- Backwash water softeners, sand filters and iron removal filters with bleach water.
- Again, open all the faucets and run the water until there is no bleach smell—for up to 15 minutes.

After disinfecting your well, the water needs to be tested to verify that it is safe to drink. Although bleach is effective against microorganisms, it will not remove chemical contamination that may have gotten into your well. Contact your local health department for information about how to get your water tested.

For more information about how to protect yourself and your family before, during and after natural disasters, visit www.vdh.virginia.gov/weather or the Virginia Department of Emergency Management's Web site at www.vaemergency.com.

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